

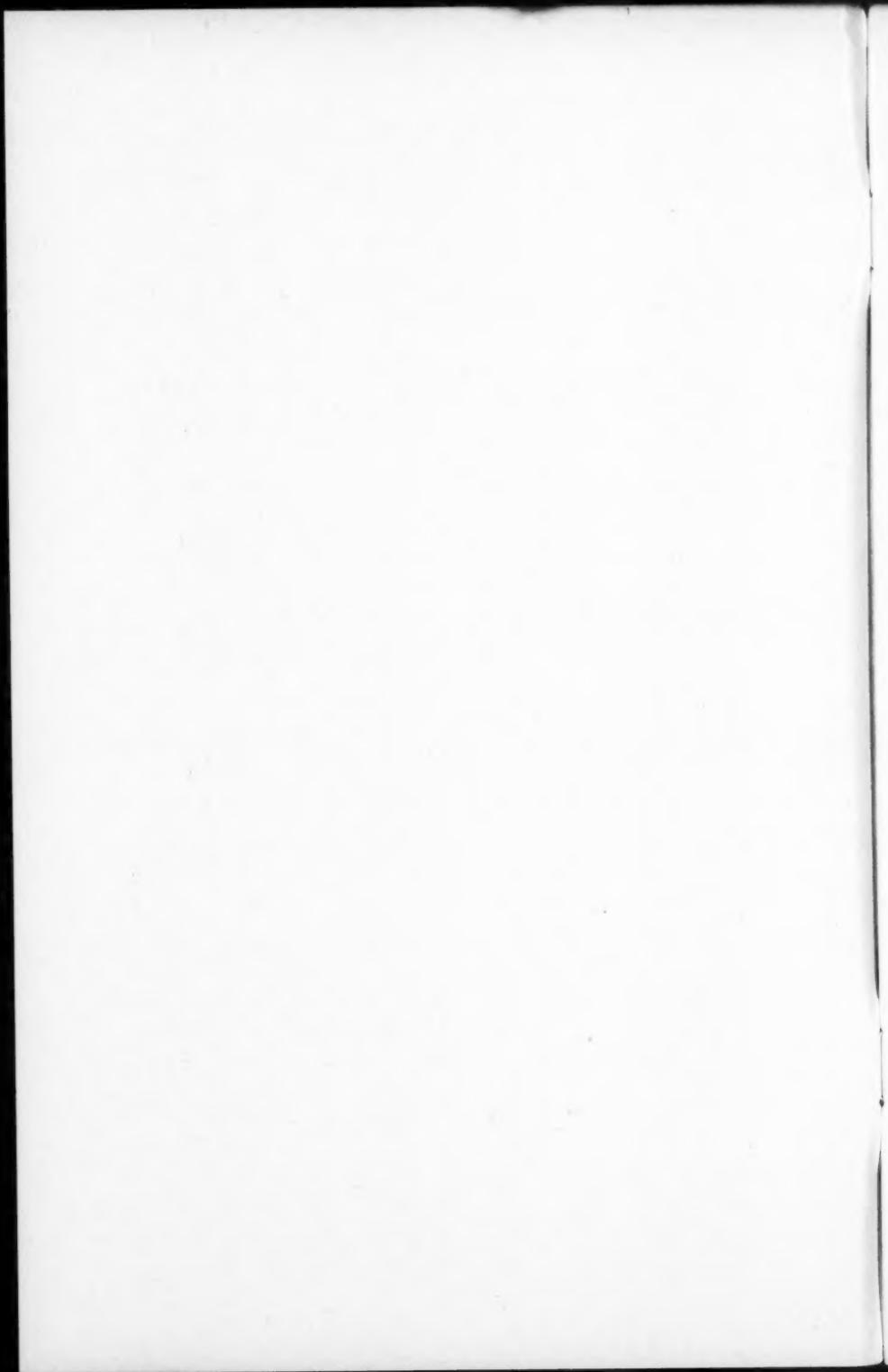
BULLETIN  
OF THE  
ALLEN MEMORIAL ART MUSEUM  
OBERLIN COLLEGE



Pl. 3

The Queen of Sheba Visits King Solomon

EXHIBITION OF  
"BONADER," SWEDISH PEASANT PAINTINGS  
On Loan From  
THE FLORENCE DIBELL BARTLETT COLLECTION  
AT THE CHICAGO ART INSTITUTE



## Foreword

For the first time in its history, Oberlin College is now offering a course in Scandinavian Art. This is under the direction of Miss Ellen Johnson, who has compiled this catalogue and planned the exhibition which it describes. In addition to her general knowledge of the field, Miss Johnson is particularly familiar with the quaint and interesting Swedish *bonader*, from which a representative selection has been made. Their loan to Oberlin has been made possible through the generous cooperation of the Chicago Art Institute. To Mr. Meyric Rogers, the Curator of Decorative Arts, and to Miss Florence Dibell Bartlett, to whom the collection belongs and by whom it has been loaned to the Institute for many years, I should like to express my warmest thanks on behalf of Oberlin College. We are also much indebted to President Henry Goddard Leach, of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, for permission to reprint a portion of an article by Miss Johnson on *Swedish Peasant Bonader* published in *The American-Scandinavian Review* for Autumn, 1943.

CLARENCE WARD, *Director*  
Dudley Peter Allen Memorial Art Museum

#### NOTE

In this bulletin, an italicized "a" in a Swedish word which otherwise is printed in Roman type and a Roman "a" appearing in an italicized word are used to indicate the Swedish letter "a" with a circle over it (pronounced oa, as in the English word "shoal").

The Swedish character is not available in type as this bulletin goes to press.

## "Bonader," Swedish Peasant Paintings\*

While Swedish art is largely influenced by continental styles, particularly French and German, there does exist a native strain, which is most apparent in such examples of folk art as these peasant paintings on loan from the Florence Dibell Bartlett Collection of the Chicago Art Institute. From this splendid collection of forty-two *bonader*, we have selected fourteen examples to exhibit various subjects, dates, and styles. The subjects are mostly Biblical, with some allegories, and a few scenes from the peasants' lives. They date from the eighteenth to about the middle of the nineteenth century.

One of the most charming features of these pictures is their sincere and convincing naïveté. The artists were untrained, but far from unskilled, peasants, for whom painting was just an avocation, such, as, for example, Anders Eriksson who was a sacristan at *Ås* in *Småland*, or Per Persson, a farmer from Lusshult in *Vra* parish, who began painting wall-hangings in 1759 because that was a hard year and he needed extra money. It proved to be such a remunerative avocation that he continued with it until his death at the age of eighty-eight. Meanwhile, he had taught the technique to his seven children, who in turn taught their children. As in the case of most folk art, the technique was often handed down, in this way, from generation to generation. The paintings were hung on the walls to brighten the dark interiors of the peasant cottages, especially on festive occasions, such as holidays and weddings. Sometimes they were cut or otherwise adapted to fit a particular wall-space, as may be seen in *A Parish Church* (pl. 1), to which has been added another picture representing a horse and rider. The decorative border is entirely different in size and design. The parish church in this picture is characteristic of the *Dalarna* type, with

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\* "Bonader" literally means hangings (tapestries); but the term has come to be applied to the particular kind of painted hangings here discussed.

its steep roof and Baroque tower, with double-curved (ogee) dome. Specifically, it can almost certainly be identified as Rättvik church on the basis of the gate represented. (Compare photograph in *American Swedish Monthly*, February, 1946, page 17.)

Naturally the colors used in these peasant wall-paintings are neither sophisticated nor subtle. They are simple and clear: red, yellow, blue, green, grey, brown, and black; but they show variety and intensity, heightened by the strong black outlines. The colors differ according to the material, the date, and the painter's taste. Those painted on linen, upon which a coat of sizing was first applied, tend to produce a warm, glowing effect. The linen ones are usually earlier, though this is no certain way of determining their date. Later, as the hangings began to be produced in greater number, paper was substituted. It was usually light tan or grey and often covered with white sizing to give durability, body, and brilliance. The effect of the colors painted on paper is colder, more sparkling, and with stronger light and dark contrast in a higher key. The pigments are mostly of the usual vegetable and mineral sources, applied with a binder, such as glue, and water. On more than one occasion the painter probably had to make his own colors. It has been conjectured that some of the brown color was made from coffee and the red from *lingon* berries.

Woven hangings had been used as far back as the Viking times; and in the Renaissance the walls of the large country estates were often covered with gilt fabric or the like, and then hung with tapestries or printed textiles. However, in the middle of the eighteenth century the gentry began using oil-painted wall-paper. About the same time, or a little earlier, the painting of church interiors had flourished with renewed vigor. Both the decorations of the churches and the painted paper on the walls of the country manors may have been sources of inspiration for the peasants' wall-hangings; but their execution and character are distinctly the peasants' own. The same situation holds with regard to other sources of the *bonader*: mediaeval church murals, block-books, and illustrated Bibles (particularly

*Gustaf Adolf's Bible* of 1618 illustrated by Olof Olofsson Helsing). The peasant painter took his ideas from anything that came his way, even popular fashion-plates. However, although he often derived subject matter and arrangement of figures from such sources as the above, his use of contemporary people and costume, his strong decorative sense, his disregard of perspective and spatial planes, and his own naïveté and simplicity make his paintings altogether original and engaging.

A great part of the charm of these pictures lies in the incongruous representation of the Bible stories and characters appearing in the customs and costumes of the Swedish peasant in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The painter wanted to make the Bible stories real. Not only did he succeed in doing that; but, following the dictates of his imagination, unhampered by too much technical knowledge, he often achieved a deeper reality than an entirely correct and literal rendering would have produced. It is as Erik Axel Karlfeldt (1864-1931) wrote, in the introduction to his cycle of poems, called *Dalmalningar utlagda pa rim* (Dalecarlian paintings in rhyme): "For some of these interpretations the originals exist only in the interpreter's fancy. Like a Dalecarlian painter, I claim the modest right of my old brothers of the craft: to paint as it comes to me with capricious brush, mixing merry and serious figures—in my predecessors' spirit, though with a somewhat different technique."

Most of the paintings in the Bartlett collection come from the province of Dalarna (Dalecarlia). A magnificent book on the peasant wall-paintings of Dalarna, published by Albert Bonnier, Stockholm, 1944, has recently arrived from Sweden: *Dalmalningar* by Svante Svärdström, Curator of the Museum at Falun. It is handsomely illustrated with forty-four color plates and one hundred-thirty black and white reproductions. By reference to this book, it is possible to determine which of the Chicago *bonader* came from Dalarna and which from the other provinces such as Halland, Småland, Västergötland, Värmland (comprising the Southern school), or Hälsingland (including Gästrikland). The paintings from the South bear considerable

resemblance to textile and tapestry traditions. The pictures from Hälsingland are characterized by a continental influence, especially apparent in the more sophisticated color combinations. Moreover, the Hälsingland painters almost invariably included a motif of which they were very fond, a little red heart.

One of the features which these wall-hangings all have in common is the primitive *horror vacui*. All space not occupied by the main figures must be filled with something: floating flowers, garlands, partitions, borders. Yet the decorative fill-ins are well distributed and the impression of the whole is always one of good all-over design. There is a stage-set quality about most of them, in the flat handling of figures and buildings and in the festoons and borders. Another common feature is the inscription giving the subject or Biblical passage, sometimes the date, and sometimes, happily, the artist's initials.

By further reference to Svärdström's book, it is possible to identify some of the hitherto unknown artists whose works appear in the Bartlett collection. There are among the Chicago *bonader* four which are signed "A.O.S." That is the signature of Mats Anders Olsson (1824-1878) from the parish of Rättvik in Dalarna. It was a frequent practice in Dalarna to have, before the baptismal name, another name, common as designating a whole group or parish, which was evidently not considered essential in an official signature. This may account for the omission of "M" in Olsson's signature. The "S" stands for "Son": (Anders Ol's Son). Two pictures by Mats Anders Olsson are included in this exhibition: *Jonah Preaching to the People of Nineveh* and *Jesus Healing the Sick*.

It is also possible to suggest attributions for some of the unsigned pictures in Chicago. On the basis of stylistic comparison with reproductions in Svärdström's book, it is reasonably safe to attribute the picture *Judas' Betrayal of Jesus* (pl. 2) to Erik Danielsson (1776-1838) from the parish of Bjursas in Dalarna. This picture, dated 1805, represents a sequence of events, treated on a single horizontal plane. Reading from right to left, we see Judas with a band of men and officers as they come "thither with lanterns and torches and weapons".

Next we see Judas being bound, then a group of officers and servants warming themselves before a "fire of coals", then Jesus being led away to Caiaphas the high priest. Such flat, decorative treatment, on the single picture plane, and the space-filling floral motifs are characteristic of the *bonader* in general. Erik Danielsson's individual style characteristics may be seen in his treatment of the foreground with wave-like forms on which single little flowers appear, in the trees with their distinct oval-shaped masses of foliage with a sudden area of light in the center, in the details of costume (note especially the immense white buttons), in the treatment of the heads, narrow at the top with protruding lower faces, and in the compact clusters of flowers with dwarfed leaves, instead of the usual great swirling garlands. (Compare color plate 39 in Svärdström: *Dalmningar.*)

It is possible to suggest that the picture *Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem* was painted by the Rättvik artist who signed himself "D.A.S." The treatment of colors, costumes, figures, architectural and decorative details is very similar. (See Svärdström, pl. 89a and color pls. 32, 33.)

Another attribution which can be made with even more certainty applies to the painting *The Queen of Sheba Visits King Solomon* (pl. 3, cover). This picture, painted in 1839, is so similar to the same subject, painted in 1840, by Back Erik Andersson (1778-1847) from the parish of Leksand in Dalarna, that it must have been painted by the same master. (Compare Svärdström, pl. 38.) The peasant artist often made copies or near-copies of his pictures that were particularly popular; moreover, each of the artists devised certain details, "tricks", as it were, which he constantly repeated, such as his handling of borders, *kurbits*, and other decorative motifs. The word *kurbits* refers to the great swirling garlands so characteristic of the Dalarna school. Literally it means "gourd" and came originally from the Bible story, Jonah, chapter IV, verse 6: "And the Lord God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd." Thus the

*kurbits* is not only a decorative device; it is an ever-present symbol of comfort.

The peasant painter was fond of symbols; and he was fond of bringing the Bible stories into his own time and place. Thus Solomon here represented is actually King Karl XIV Johan, and the Queen of Sheba is Desideria, of Sweden. In this connection, it is delightful to note that when Napoleon Bonaparte is represented, his name is spelled "Bondepart". *Bonde* is the Swedish word for "peasant".

Through direct projection of the Bible stories into contemporary times, *The Children of Israel Dancing Around the Golden Calf* (pl. 4) are really the men and women of Dalarna dancing around the Maypole in their blue, red, and yellow costumes. This picture has a clear, crisp style, carefully balanced composition, and precise and graceful *kurbits*.

The four pictures thus far mentioned come from the province of Dalarna and are characteristic of that school in the handling of space, the emphasis upon architectural details, the magnificent *kurbits*, and the cut-out paper doll type of figures.

The Southern school is closer to the tapestry tradition, colors are softer and more subtle, there are little flowers instead of the tremendous *kurbits*, figures are larger and occupy more of the space, and the faces, round and broad, are more often presented in front view than in profile. Altogether, the whole effect of the Southern school seems to be toward a more plastic and painterly emphasis. Closer in these characteristics to the Southern school than to the Dalarna school are *The Marriage in Cana* and *The Three Wise Men; the Wise and Foolish Virgins*. On the basis of stylistic analogies, it is tempting to suggest that these pictures may have been done by Anders Eriksson i As, Småland; but the evidence is not sufficient. (Compare Svärdström. Introduction, fig. 38-39.)

In *The Three Wise Men; the Wise and Foolish Virgins* (pl. 5), we see an example of the painter asserting his "modest right" in the use of color. Whatever his reason: whether he was artist enough to realize that these pictures were decorations, whether he felt a quality beyond naturalism in their subjects,

whether he was limited by his materials, or whether, which might well be the case, he simply wanted to do it that way, he did not restrict his imagination in the use of color nor limit himself to naturalistic rendering. The Wise Men are dressed in naturalistic enough clothes of the type that one might easily have seen in Sweden at the time (1837); but it is not likely that one could see anywhere a pink horse such as Balthazar rides or a dappled one with red and blue spots like Melchior's. The Wise Men ride over hills, charmingly represented in the most direct simple style, with flowers almost as big as the hills themselves. They ride through cities whose buildings are rendered in naïve perspective as in the typical Swedish country house below Balthazar. The treatment is not altogether unlike the deliberate disregard of the "laws" of perspective so often seen in contemporary painting. In the upper right of the picture shines the Star throwing off glorious red and blue rays. Under the Star, sits the Madonna, dressed in green, and surrounded by a mandorla-like halo in blue and red. The Three Wise Men have politely taken off their hats as they stand or kneel in offering their gifts. The Madonna and the wise and foolish virgins have blond hair with red-brown outlines. The Bridegroom himself looks quite like the ladies, but his hair is neither so long nor so curly, and he has an immense halo. They all have the same healthy round faces, even the angel; but, so that we shall realize there is a difference, the angel is given splendid blue wings. It is very easy to distinguish the foolish virgins from the wise ones, since the latter wear gold crowns, stand very straight, and their lamps burn brightly. The poor foolish virgins have black crowns, their lamps do not burn, and they huddle together in an undignified way. The one on the left is quite entertaining as she cocks her head rakishly in order to get into the picture.

The figures as well as the buildings and other elements of the composition are depicted in a flat manner on a single plane, thus achieving, albeit unconsciously, one of the first requisites of a good wall decoration: to maintain the flatness of the surface.

This treatment of perspective and picture plane is evidenced

in all of the *bonader*. The wedding feast in *The Marriage in Cana* (pl. 6) takes place at a table represented as though seen from above, a device often used in ancient Egyptian paintings of gardens. The table is simply set with yellow plates, orange-outlined, and blue knives with yellow handles. Other colorful details include the blue and red halo around the Christ head, the enchanting flowers in the bride's hair, her elaborate crown, the grey-blue and white hair of the groom and the pastor, and the tremendous drinking cup held in fragile little hands. The hands in most of these pictures are strikingly out of proportion, as is often the case in primitive painting.

We noted that the Southern school is more plastic in effect, more subtle in color, and closer to the tapestry tradition. These characteristics are enhanced by the use of canvas in *The Three Wise Men*; *the Wise and Foolish Virgins* and *The Marriage in Cana*. In comparing the above two pictures with, for example, *The Children of Israel Dancing Around the Golden Calf* (pl. 4) or *The Queen of Sheba Visits King Solomon* (pl. 3. cover), the difference in effect between canvas (linen) and paper can readily be seen. In the latter two, which are painted on paper, the colors are bright and sparkling, the outlines are defined with almost cut-out precision, and the whole impression is one of strong light and dark contrast.

Another of the pictures painted on canvas is *Asses Laden with Sacks of Corn* (pl. 7), one of the most striking of the purely decorative pieces. It is a splendid composition of design in variation. The mildly abstracted animals in blue, yellow, rose, orange, with brown and black outlines, bring to mind Franz Marc's expressionist, poster-like studies of animals.

That *The Death of Absalom* (pl. 8) is painted on paper will be apparent, even in the reproduction, from its clearly defined outlines and strong light-dark contrast. It represents a Biblical story with a grim moral for young people. The inscription reads: "As Absalom on the flight rides and is caught in a great oak, so are punished all children who do not obey father and mother." Absalom is hanging in an oak tree which appears to have oranges growing on it. The specific contemporary

military costumes, the horse walking off gaily with his nose in the air, the way Absalom's hat falls to the ground, and other amusing little details in no way detract from the conviction and monumentality of the picture. This is true of all of the *bonader*; they have a largeness which is not due entirely to their size. It derives also from the fact that they are thought out and executed with boldness, simplicity, and directness. These qualities are partly a result of the strange perspective and distorted proportions.

By distortion, those elements of a picture which are most important are given expression and emphasis. Thus, in the painting *The Lord Appears to Abraham and Sarah* (pl. 9), the figures of the men are as tall as three stories of the Swedish manor house on the right. Sarah, within the tent, is as high as two stories of the church on the left. The tent has an elegant interior and out of the top of it grows a tree-like *kurbit* composed of three immense flowers. Abraham offers food to the visitors, who are dressed in Swedish ecclesiastical and military garb, as he listens to their prophecy that his wife shall bear a child. The inscription at the top reads: "Then laughed Sara because she was ninety years."

Particularly delightful from the point of view of perspective is the painting representing *Jonah Preaching to the People of Nineveh* (pl. 10). Here we see the cross section of the interior of a typical Swedish country church. The men sit on one side, the women on the other, and Jonah, as a pastor, stands in the raised pulpit. The representation of the masonry in the foundation of the church is especially intriguing. This picture was painted in 1851 by Mats Anders Olsson of Rättvik parish in Dalarna. In his work, one sees the beginning of the disintegration of *bonader* painting. Color has deteriorated; line and form have become careless and sketchy; and the whole technique appears indifferent, almost slovenly. This casualness of execution is not so apparent in *Jonah Preaching to the People of Nineveh* as it becomes in his *Jesus Healing the Sick* painted three years later. A rapid, nervous handling does not necessarily imply disintegration of style; but in this particular case,

it certainly seems to be a downward step from the sure, clean, restrained boldness and precision typical of the *bonader* in general. Through consideration of similar subjects painted by Mats Anders Olsson, one might suggest an alternate title for the picture *Jesus Healing the Sick*, namely: *Through His Redeeming Love*, the implication being, in this particular representation, that God's love heals the spirit as well as the body.

Besides those in the Bartlett collection at the Art Institute of Chicago, there are a few other *bonader* in this country, notably in the Worcester Art Museum, the Minneapolis Art Institute, and some private collections. They are, for the most part, unsigned. However, as is the case with so much mediaeval art, the very anonymity of these simple, modest, and sincere paintings is a great part of their charm and meaning. It is such qualities as these that inspire the verses of Karlfeldt in the cycle referred to above, *Dalmalningar utlagda pa rim*. The peasant painter from Dalarna himself speaks in the words of Karlfeldt:

Jag malade Elia  
som far till himmelrik,  
jag malade Maria  
sa vit och duvolik.  
O, kunde nu jag mala  
min egen mörka själ,  
att klar den matte stråla  
inför Guds son och Mikael!

(I have painted Elijah  
who rides up to heaven,  
I have painted Maria  
so white and so dovelike.  
O, could I now paint  
my own darkened soul  
to make it shine clear  
before God and His Son! )

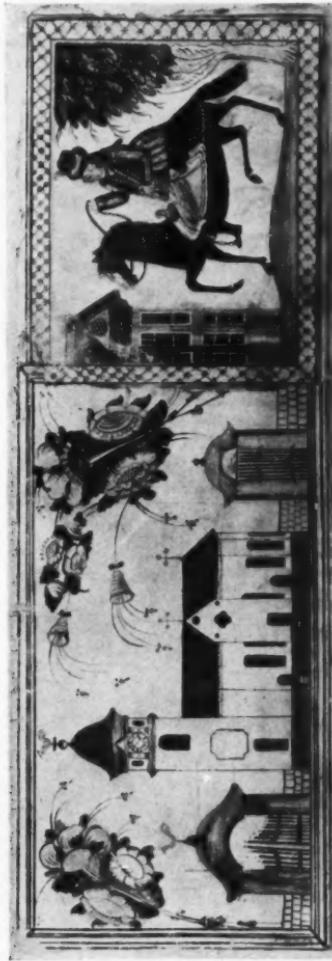
—ELLEN JOHNSON

## Catalogue

Note: An asterisk before a number indicates that the painting is illustrated.

- \*1. A PARISH CHURCH; A HORSEMAN  
Paper, 62½" x 21½"
- \*2. JUDAS' BETRAYAL OF JESUS  
By Erik Danielsson (?), 1776-1838, active at Bjursås, Dalarna.  
Dated 1805.  
Paper, 62½" x 26½"
- \*3. (cover) THE QUEEN OF SHEBA VISITS KING SOLOMON  
By Back Erik Andersson (?), 1778-1847, active at Leksand, Dalarna.  
Dated 1839.  
Paper, 51½" x 44"
- \*4. THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL DANCING AROUND THE GOLDEN CALF  
Dated 1808.  
Paper, 63¼" x 24¾"
- \*5. THE THREE WISE MEN; THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS  
Dated 1837.  
Canvas, 68" x 48½"
- \*6. THE MARRIAGE IN CANA  
Canvas, 29" x 17"
- \*7. ASSES LADEN WITH SACKS OF CORN  
Canvas, 35" x 11"
- \*8. THE DEATH OF ABSALOM  
Dated 1832.  
Paper, 44" x 26"
- \*9. THE LORD APPEARS TO ABRAHAM AND SARAH  
Dated 1815.  
Canvas, 40½" x 24½"
- \*10. JONAH PREACHING TO THE PEOPLE OF NINEVEH  
By Mats Anders Olsson, 1824-1878, active at Rättvik, Dalarna.  
Signed: A.O.S. and dated 1851.  
Paper, 45½" x 38½"
- 11. JESUS HEALING THE SICK (THROUGH HIS REDEEMING LOVE)  
By Mats Anders Olsson, 1824-1878, active at Rättvik, Dalarna.  
Signed: A.O.S. and dated 1854.  
Paper, 43¾" x 37"

12. JESUS' ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM (fragment)  
By D.A.S. (?), active at Rättvik, Dalarna.  
Canvas, 45 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 43 $\frac{7}{8}$ "
13. GOOD DAY MY ROSE AND LOVELY LADY  
Dated 1854.  
Paper, 26" x 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
14. CAPTIVES APPEARING BEFORE EZEKIEL  
Canvas, 44" x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

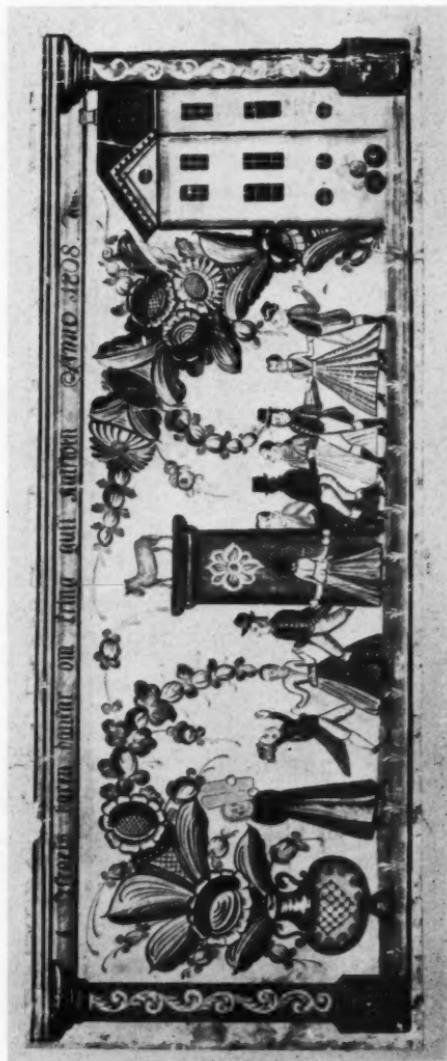


A Parish Church; A Horseman

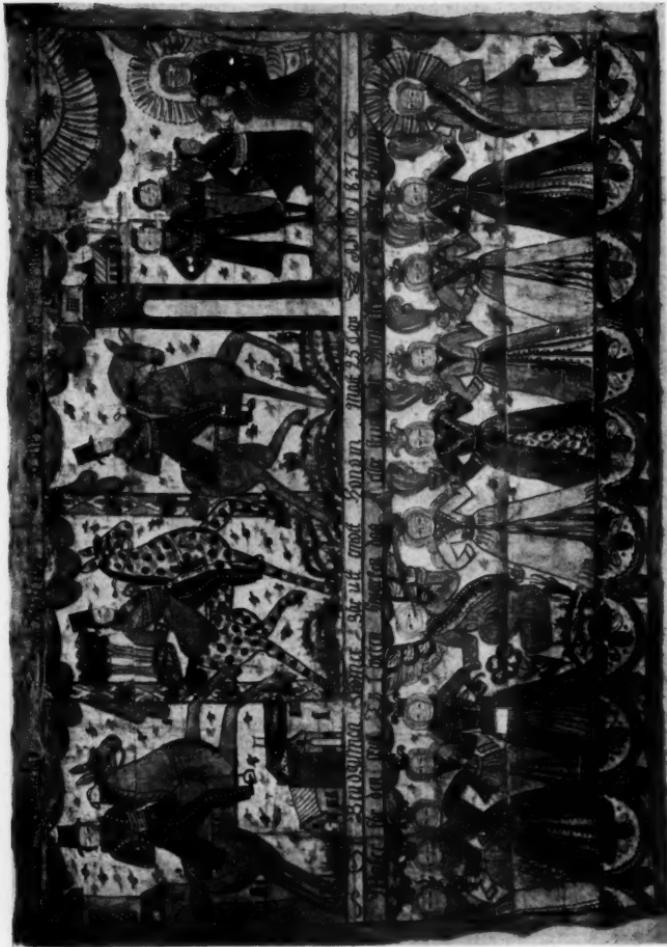
Pl. 1



Judas' Betrayal of Jesus



The Children of Israel Dancing Around the Golden Calf



The Three Wise Men; The Wise and Foolish Virgins

The Marriage in Cana

Pl. 6

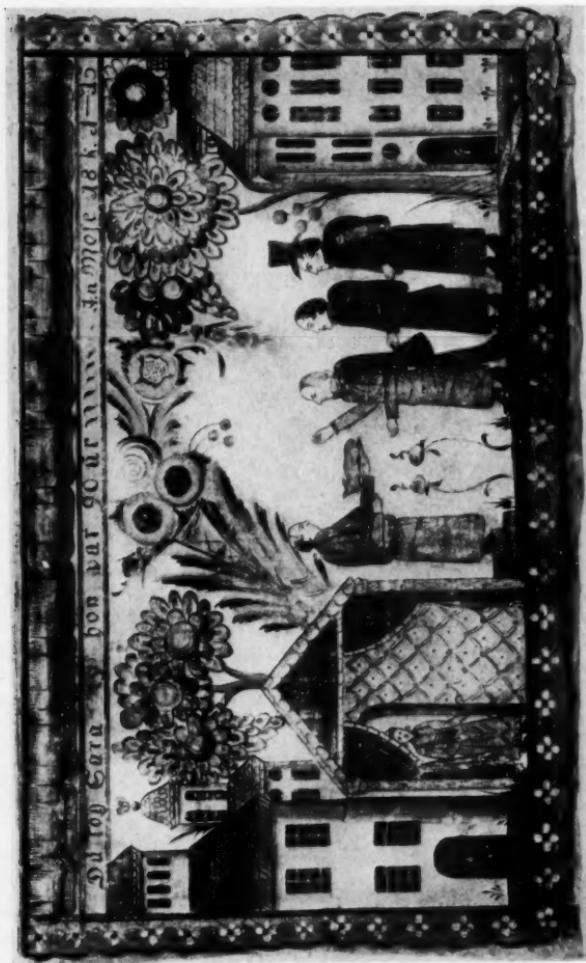




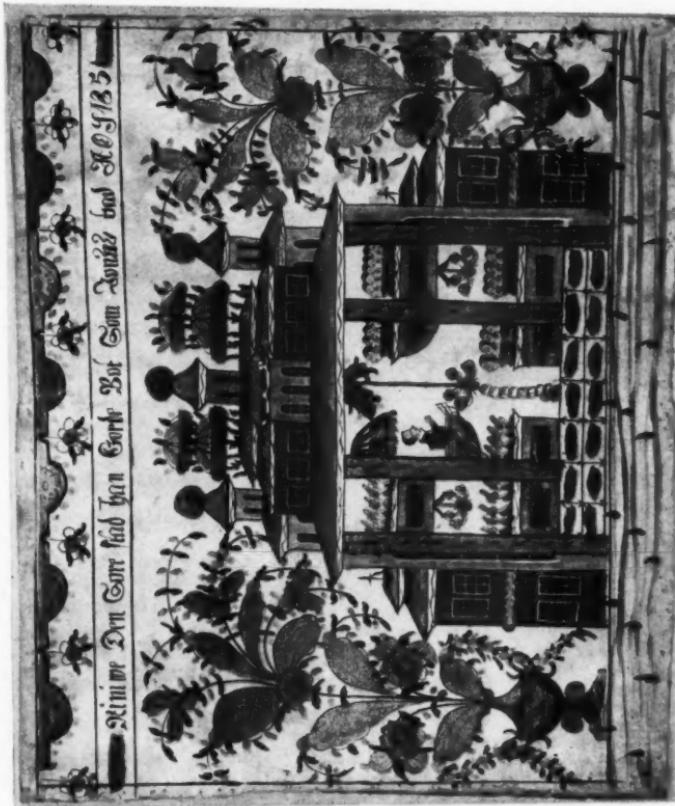
Asses Laden with Sacks of Corn



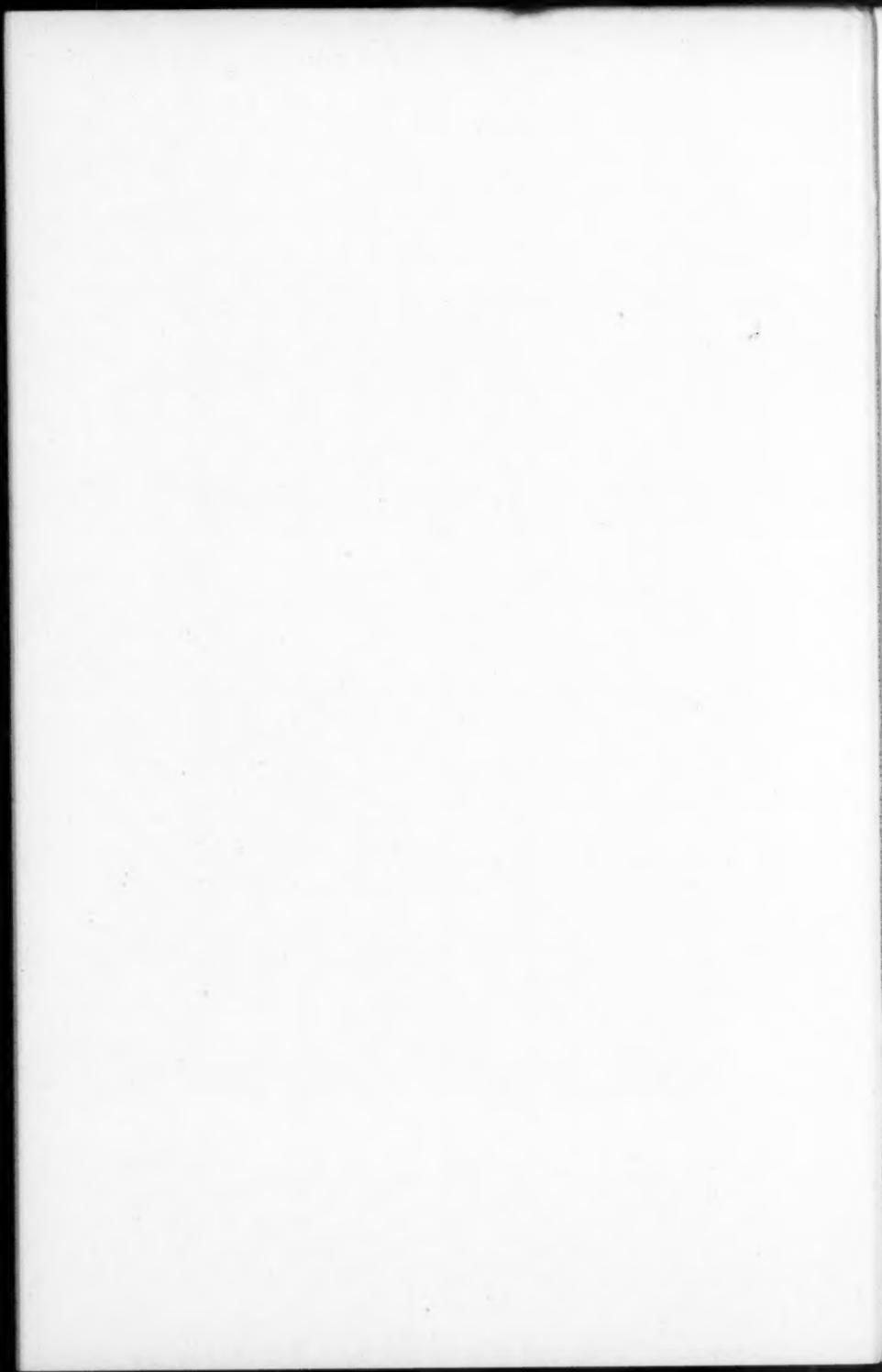
The Death of Absalom

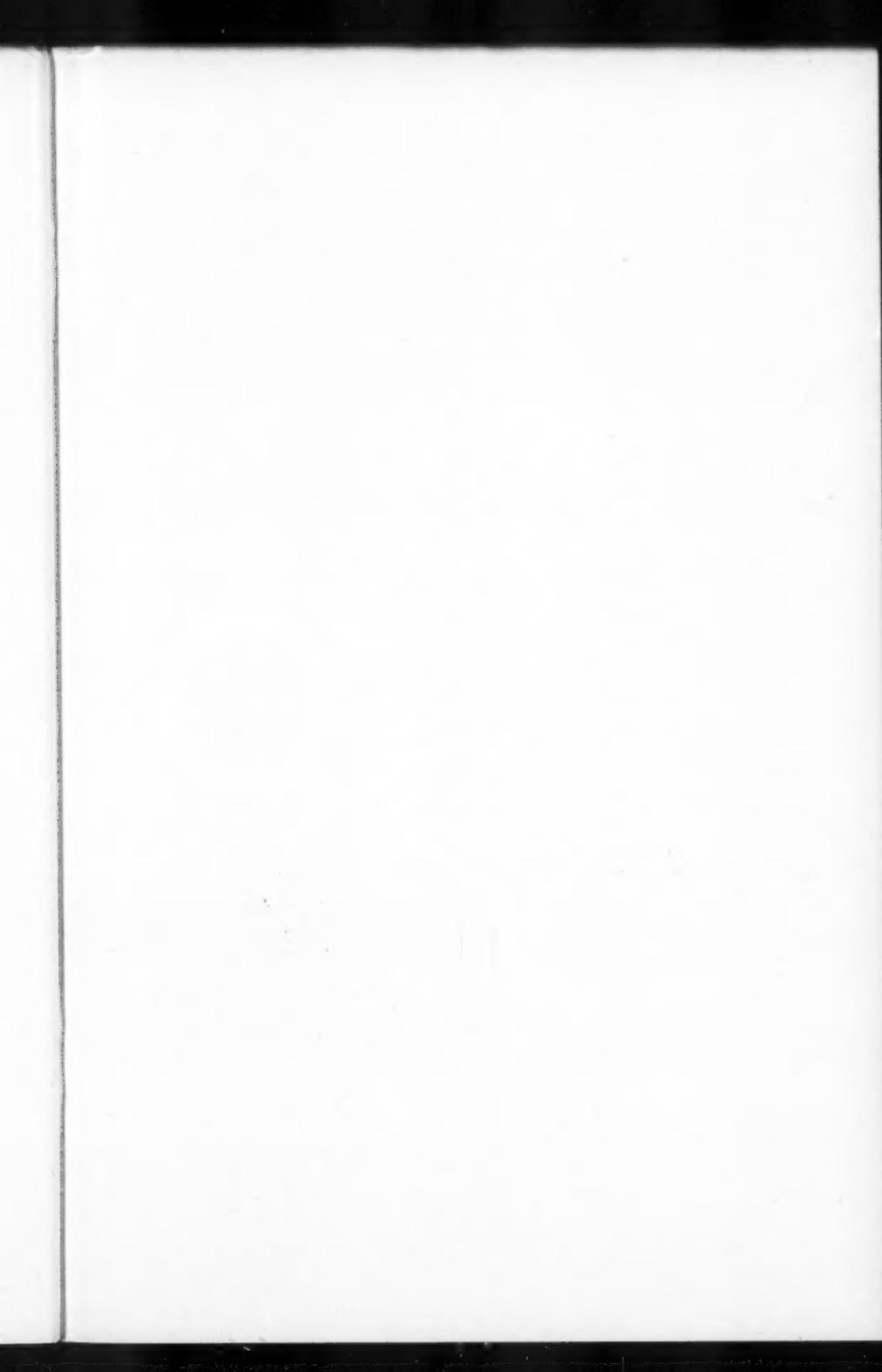


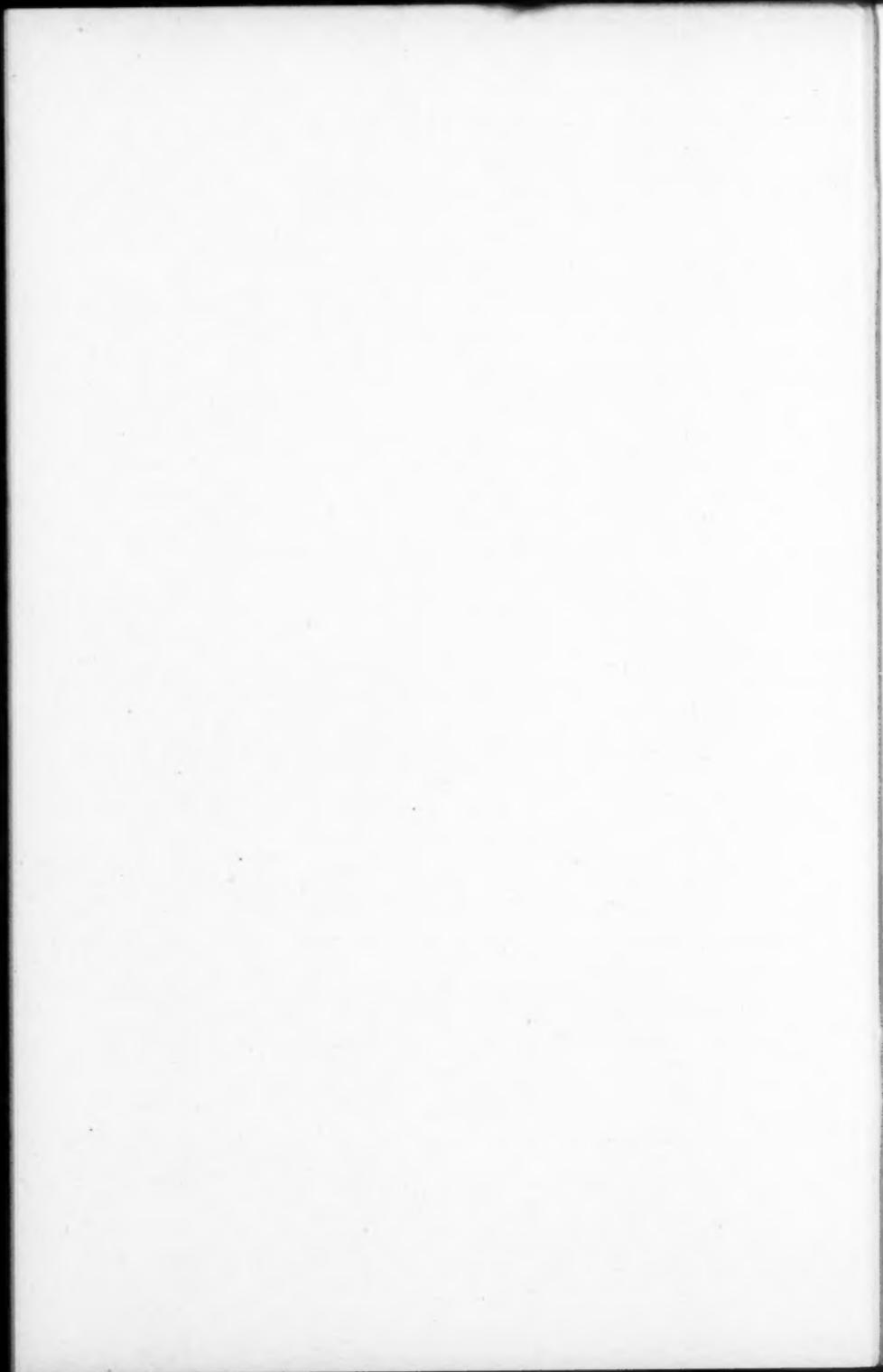
The Lord Appears to Abraham and Sarah

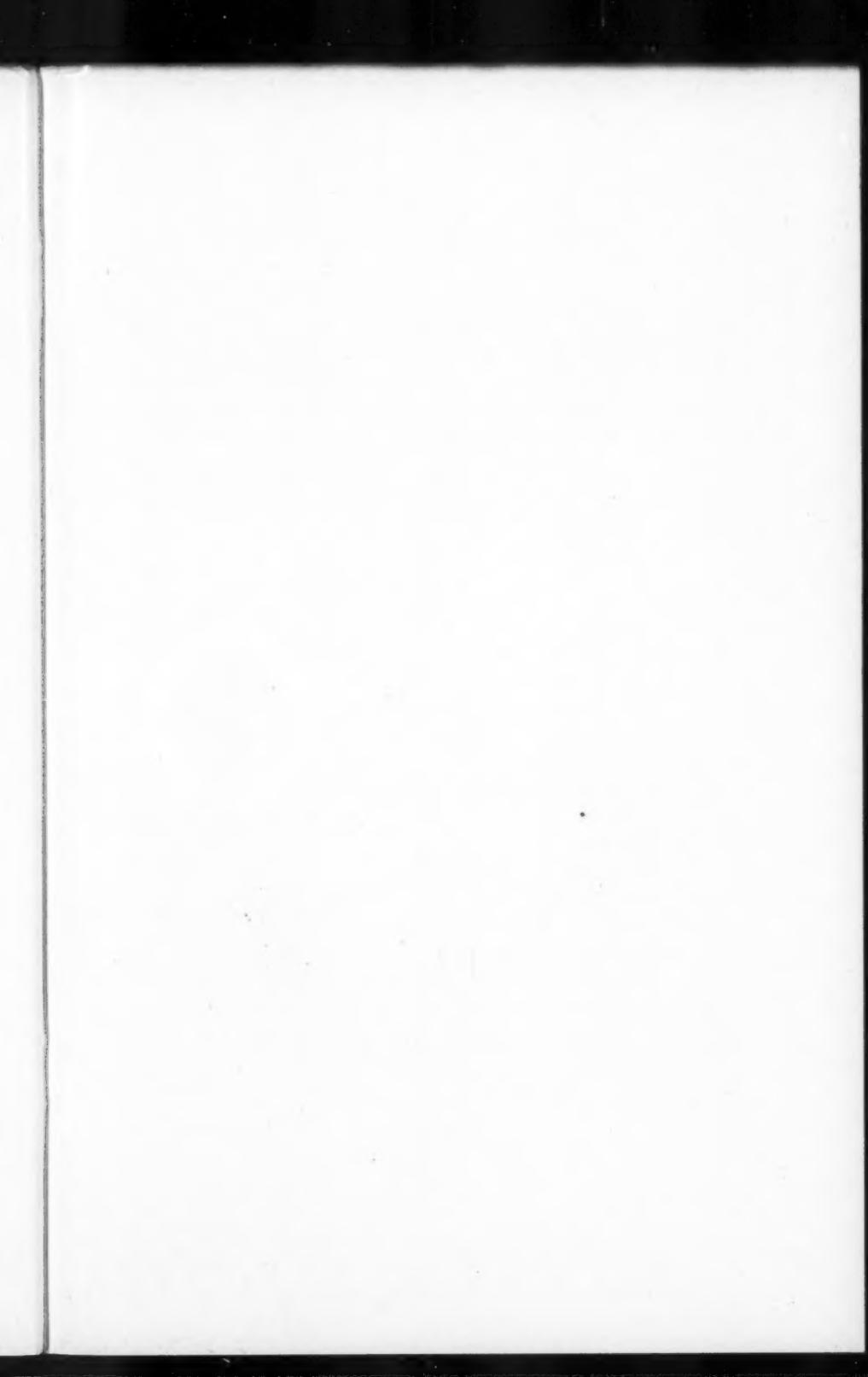


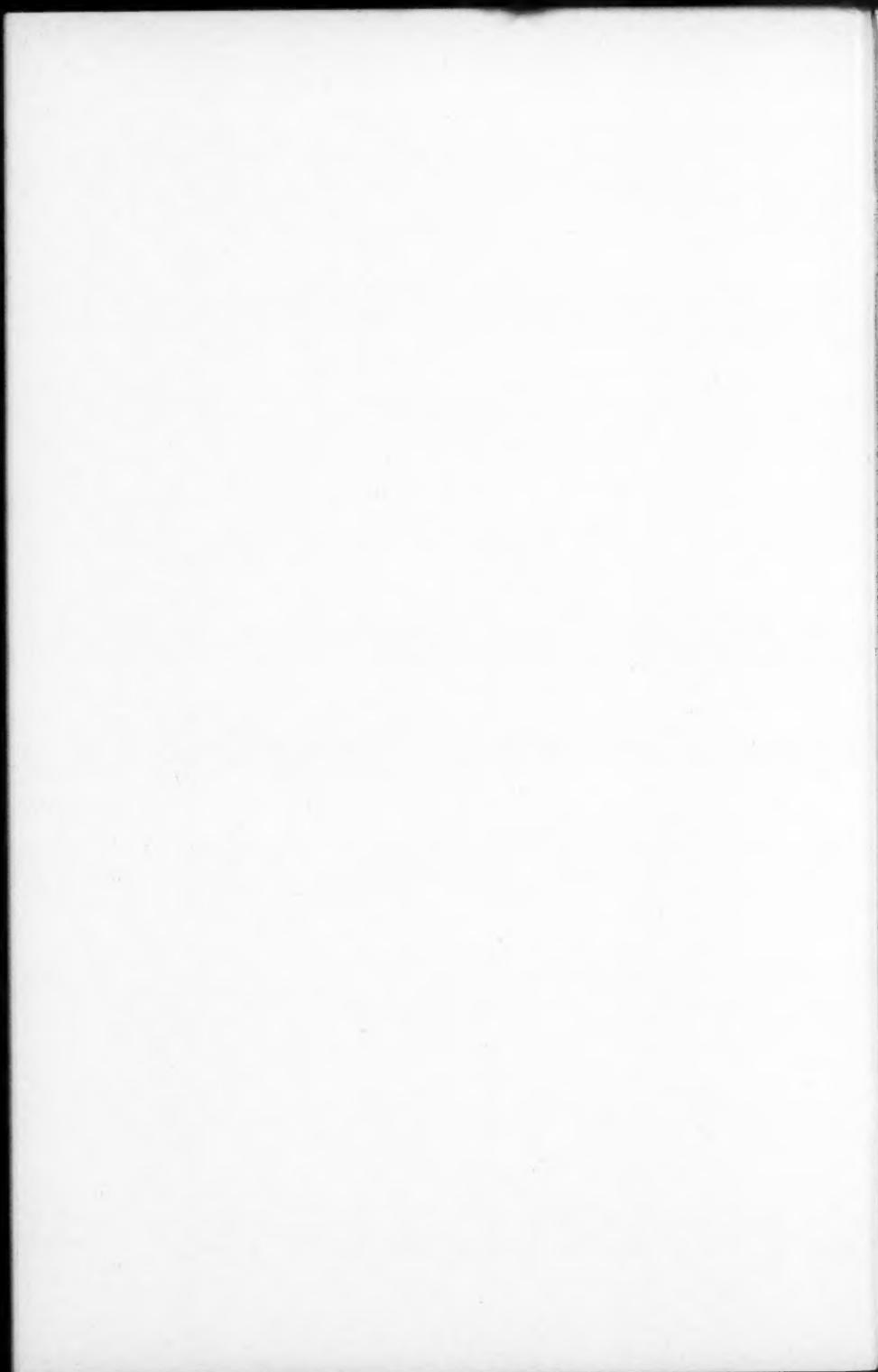
Jonah Preaching to the People of Nineveh

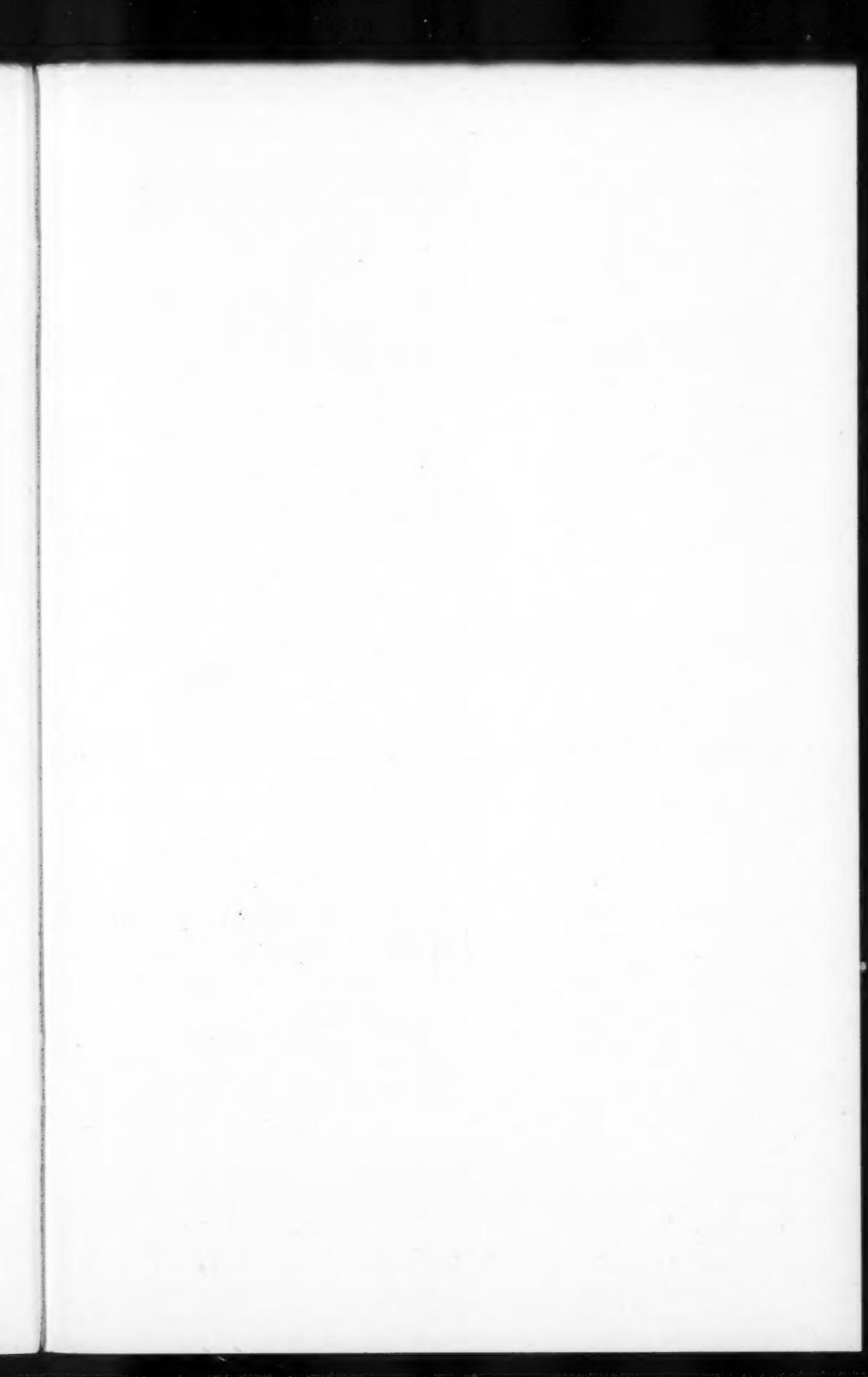












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ELLEN JOHNSON, Librarian

#### FACULTY OF ART DEPARTMENT

CLARENCE WARD, Professor of the History and Appreciation of Art  
WOLFGANG STECHOW, Professor of Fine Arts  
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#### PUBLICATIONS

The Museum Bulletin and catalogues for special exhibitions are published at irregular intervals and are sent free to all members of the Oberlin Friends of Art. They may be purchased separately.

Photographs and post cards of museum objects are on sale at the Museum. Orders by mail are invited.

#### MUSEUM HOURS

Weekdays, 1:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M.  
Evenings, 7:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M. Except Saturday and Sunday.  
Sundays, 2:00 P.M. to 4:00 P.M.  
Open free at all times.

*Museum memberships and gifts may be deducted from net income subject to Federal Income Tax.*

